Evangelical Motifs in the Dramas of Austin Anigala

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Abstract
This article examines evangelical motifs in Austin E. Anigala's Riddles of Life, The Living Dead, and Cold Wings of Darkness. Using qualitative literary research and close textual analysis, it considers how dialogue, characterisation, conflict, symbolism, and plot development represent Christian witness and spiritual change. The analysis identifies recurring motifs of warning, confrontation with sin, resistance, fear, syncretism, spiritual awakening, delayed decision, and redemption. In Riddles of Life, evangelism appears through Bini's warnings and Enumah's eventual recognition of the need for repentance. The Living Dead presents Christian witness as marginalised by fear and reliance on traditional spiritual protection, while Cold Wings of Darkness dramatises a conflict between Christian faith, scepticism, materialism, and destructive spiritual forces. Across the three plays, Anigala presents evangelism as a process that requires more than proclamation: it involves moral credibility, personal choice, and a willingness to confront social and spiritual contradictions. The article contributes to the study of Nigerian drama by showing how evangelical motifs function as both thematic concerns and dramatic devices.

Keywords: *Austin Anigala; evangelical motifs; Nigerian drama; evangelism; Christian theatre; textual analysis*

Introduction

Evangelism is the communication of the Christian gospel, with the aim of inviting people to faith, discipleship, and spiritual transformation. Kight describes it as, sharing Jesus Christ with people who do not yet know Him (1), while Bosch situates evangelism within the Christian responsibility, to make disciples of all nations (389). Terry similarly defines evangelism as, presenting Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and inviting people to become His disciples (3). Although evangelism is often associated with preaching and personal testimony, it also takes place through literature, performance, and other forms of storytelling.

Drama is especially suited to the communication of religious and moral ideas because it makes conflict visible through character, dialogue, action, and consequence. Brockett and Hildy explain that medieval religious drama communicated biblical narratives and moral teachings through accessible performance (86, 89–91). This tradition demonstrates how theatrical representation can give dramatic form to abstract ideas such as sin, repentance, redemption, and salvation. In contemporary contexts, drama can therefore serve both artistic and reflective purposes, inviting

audiences to consider the ethical and spiritual implications of characters' choices.

A motif is a recurring element, image, action, or idea that contributes to a literary work's structure and meaning. Baldick identifies motifs as recurring narrative elements that reinforce themes and establish coherence (226). Abrams and Harpham likewise explain that motifs in drama are conveyed through dialogue, characterisation, plot, conflict, and stage action (236). Evangelical motifs may include faith, repentance, conversion, forgiveness, sacrifice, grace, redemption, and spiritual transformation. Their significance lies not simply in their presence but in how repetition develops the dramatic work's central concerns.

This article examines evangelical motifs in three plays by Austin E. Anigala: *Riddles of Life*, *The Living Dead*, and *Cold Wings of Darkness*. It focuses on the ways evangelism is represented through character development, dialogue, moral conflict, symbolism, and narrative resolution. Rather than treating evangelism as a subject mentioned only in religious statements, the analysis considers how it operates as a dramatic process shaped by resistance, persuasion, fear, doubt, and the possibility of change. Although Nigerian drama has received scholarly attention for its treatment of religious, moral, and social questions, evangelical motifs remain a useful focus for close analysis. In particular, Anigala's dramatic representation of evangelism can be examined through the recurring patterns by which characters encounter Christian teaching, resist or question it, and confront the consequences of their choices. This article addresses that interpretive gap by analysing how evangelical motifs are embedded in the selected plays.

The article has two objectives: (1) to identify and examine evangelical motifs in Anigala's selected plays; and (2) to discuss the thematic and narrative elements through which the plays represent evangelism.

Conceptual Clarification

Motif, Evangelism, And Drama

Motifs contribute to the development of literary meaning through repetition and pattern. Thompson's study of folk literature presents motifs as recurring narrative elements that persist across traditions (xviii), while Chatman emphasises the role of repeated narrative structures in guiding interpretation (80–81). Abrams describes motifs as recurring structures or devices that clarify a work's major themes (162), and Rimmon-Kenan stresses that repetition is necessary for an image or element to function as a motif (128). Motifs thus connect individual scenes to a work's wider concerns. Within Christian thought, evangelism involves communicating the gospel and inviting people to respond through faith. The New Testament's instruction to preach the gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15) provides a biblical basis for this practice. Green, drawing on William Temple's definition, presents evangelism as communicating Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people may put their faith in God, accept Christ as Saviour, and serve Him within the church (35). Green also distinguishes evangelism from mere recruitment or instruction, emphasising that it should be grounded in the good news and expressed through the life of the Christian community (35–36). Drama offers a medium through which these ideas can be represented as lived conflict rather than abstract doctrine. Religious theatre has historically used performance to communicate biblical narratives and moral questions. Medieval mystery, miracle, and morality plays dramatised scriptural events, saintly lives, and struggles between virtue and vice (Brockett and Hildy 191; Nicoll 129, 132; Davidson, Walsh, and Broos 3). The combination of dialogue, visual imagery, action, and emotional tension can make spiritual dilemmas accessible to audiences. In Anigala's plays, evangelism is therefore considered

through the recurring dramatic patterns by which characters warn, persuade, resist, doubt, repent, or experience spiritual change.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts motif theory as its primary analytical framework, supported by Christian literary criticism as an interpretive perspective. This combination is appropriate because the study examines recurring evangelical ideas and the ways they acquire meaning through characterisation, dialogue, conflict, symbolism, and plot in Austin E. Anigala's *Riddles of Life*, *The Living Dead*, and *Cold Wings of Darkness*. The framework treats evangelical motifs as literary patterns whose functions must be established through close reading, rather than assuming that every religious reference automatically constitutes evangelism.

Motif Theory

Motif theory provides the principal method for identifying and interpreting recurring elements within the selected plays. Stith Thompson's work on narrative motifs established a systematic way of recognising recurring characters, objects, actions, and incidents across stories and traditions (Thompson). For literary analysis, however, a motif should not be treated merely as an item that appears more than once. Its significance depends on how recurrence contributes to the development of meaning within a particular text. James M. Morgan argues that motifs possess cumulative and rhetorical force: as they recur, they develop in relation to the narrative and can shape how readers understand its movement and concerns (194–216). This emphasis on recurrence and function is especially useful for a study of evangelical motifs, because warnings, resistance to religious counsel, spiritual crisis, repentance, and the possibility of redemption become meaningful through their placement and development across dramatic episodes.

Christian Literary Criticism

Christian literary criticism supplies a complementary interpretive lens for examining how the plays engage Christian concepts and moral questions. It considers the relationship between literary form and theological ideas without reducing a literary work to a sermon or assuming that its meaning is exhausted by its religious message. Luke Ferretter's study of Christian literary theory demonstrates that Christian theology can inform literary interpretation while still engaging critically with the methods and questions of literary studies (Ferretter). Kevin Mills's account of literature and theology likewise situates their relationship within a developed critical tradition and recognises that the interaction between literary and theological discourse raises questions about language, meaning, and interpretation (Mills). Accordingly, this study reads Christian ideas in Anigala's plays through their dramatic construction: what characters say, how others respond, how conflicts unfold, and whether narrative outcomes affirm, complicate, or question the positions expressed. The framework is applied through four connected analytical steps. First, the analysis identifies recurring motifs associated with Christian witness and spiritual change, including warning, persuasion, resistance, fear, conviction, repentance, faith, and redemption. Second, it examines the dramatic vehicles through which these motifs are conveyed, especially dialogue, character relationships, symbolic objects, dreams, supernatural encounters, and moments of crisis. Third, it traces the function of each motif within the plot, asking whether it initiates conflict, exposes a character's moral or spiritual position, intensifies uncertainty, or contributes to a change in direction. Fourth, it interprets these patterns in relation to the study's

objectives, considering how the plays dramatise evangelism as a process involving both the communication of Christian teaching and the responses—acceptance, hesitation, resistance, or transformation—of other characters.

This framework enables the study to move beyond listing Christian themes to explaining how evangelical motifs work as elements of dramatic structure and meaning. In *Riddles of Life*, for example, the analysis can consider how Bini's warnings recur and how Enumah's eventual self-reflection relates to the play's moral and spiritual trajectory. In *The Living Dead*, it can examine the relationship between Christian witness, fear, and reliance on competing spiritual practices. In *Cold Wings of Darkness*, it can trace how prayer, scepticism, spiritual opposition, and the possibility of conversion shape the central conflicts. These are textual interpretations, not claims that the plays have been proven to change audience behaviour. The framework therefore distinguishes the representation of evangelism within the plays from any unmeasured effects on readers or spectators. It also allows the analysis to acknowledge ambiguity and contradiction rather than forcing every event into a predetermined theological conclusion.

Motif theory is the most direct framework for the study because the research question centres on recurring evangelical patterns and their narrative functions. Christian literary criticism complements it by clarifying the religious and ethical vocabulary through which those patterns are interpreted. Together, the approaches provide a focused, text-based method for examining how Anigala represents evangelism as a dramatic process shaped by witness, conflict, choice, and the possibility of spiritual change. This framework is independent of any theory attributed to another playwright and is therefore aligned with the article's exclusive focus on Austin E. Anigala.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative literary method based on close textual analysis of *Riddles of Life*, *The Living Dead*, and *Cold Wings of Darkness*. The analysis attends to dialogue, characterisation, plot structure, imagery, conflict, and resolution, identifying recurring elements associated with Christian witness and spiritual transformation. Secondary literature on motif, evangelism, and religious drama provides the conceptual context. The discussion is interpretive and text-based; it does not claim to measure audience responses or establish the empirical effectiveness of the plays as evangelistic instruments.

Discussion

Evangelical Motifs in *Riddles of Life*

Riddles of Life explores love, morality, social expectations, and spiritual responsibility through Enumah, Chioma, and Bini. Enumah and Chioma defend their relationship against Bini's objections to their conduct. Bini's warnings establish evangelism as a persistent moral voice, while the couple's resistance introduces the conflict between personal desire and ethical responsibility. The later pregnancy, disagreement over abortion, and Enumah's subsequent guilt intensify the play's concern with the consequences of choices made without sufficient reflection.

Prophetic warning and confrontation with sin. Bini functions as the principal evangelistic figure. He cautions Enumah and Chioma against decisions driven by immediate desire and urges them to consider the moral and spiritual consequences. His warnings are repeatedly dismissed, establishing a pattern in which evangelism is offered but not immediately accepted. The motif is

significant because the play does not present moral instruction as automatically effective; its influence depends on whether the characters are willing to listen.

Hedonism, conviction, and inner conflict. Enumah initially prioritises pleasure and personal freedom over responsibility. His response to Chioma's pregnancy brings the consequences of that attitude into focus. Guilt and confusion follow the abortion, and his internal struggle becomes a turning point in his character development. The play presents conviction as an inward process: the character must confront the difference between his actions and the values he has rejected.

Resistance and moral hypocrisy. Chioma and Enumah challenge Bini's moral position, while the pressure exerted by Mrs. Emeke reflects a concern with reputation, prospects, and social status. These conflicting responses complicate the play's moral landscape. Evangelism is not simply a statement of doctrine; it encounters competing priorities and resistance from characters who view moral choices through personal or material interests.

Tragic consequence and the possibility of redemption. The dream sequence involving Esenge-Senge and the marine spirits dramatises Enumah's sense of spiritual danger. The supernatural encounter externalises the conflict between desire, guilt, and accountability. Bini's subsequent encouragement leads Enumah to consider salvation through Jesus. The ending does not erase the consequences of earlier choices, but it presents repentance as possible after moral failure. Evangelism thus functions as a continuing invitation to self-examination and spiritual renewal.

Evangelical Motifs in *The Living Dead*

The Living Dead explores the conflict between Christian faith and reliance on traditional spiritual practices. Uche seeks protection through multiple cult affiliations, while his family experiences fear, conflict, and uncertainty. Adanma appeals to God in moments of distress, but her appeals are largely expressions of anxiety rather than a sustained commitment to Christian teaching. The play's central tension concerns the difference between seeking immediate protection and undergoing a deeper spiritual transformation.

Marginalised evangelism and compromised witness. Christian witness occupies a limited place in much of the play's action. Uche's statement, "These church people! She does not understand that God expects me to cater for my family and ensure their protection" (15), reveals his practical dismissal of Christian faith. His position suggests that religious commitment is judged by its perceived ability to guarantee safety. Evangelism is marginalised because the characters' fear makes ritual protection appear more immediately useful than trust in God.

Syncretism and fear. Uche's declaration that he belongs to several cults (13–14) represents a spirituality built on accumulating sources of protection. The statement "There is nothing wrong in adding to one's chain of protections" (29) captures the logic of this approach. The play presents fear as a force that encourages religious compromise: rather than choosing a coherent spiritual commitment, Uche attempts to secure himself through multiple practices. This motif positions evangelism as a challenge to fear-based belief and divided allegiance.

Doctrinal instruction and the call to change. Opone's entrance in Movement Six introduces a clearer articulation of Christian teaching. He explains the universality of sin and the need for repentance (40), defining conversion as a change of life rather than nominal association with Christianity. His insistence that charms and secret societies must be renounced presents evangelism as a demand for ethical and spiritual consistency.

Tragic reversal. The burial of the fetish object and Ese's death expose the limits of the protection Uche has trusted. His question, "Suppose in burying that object, I have helped in killing my own son?" (49), expresses the collapse of his confidence and the beginning of painful recognition. The dramatic irony is central: the practice intended to protect the family becomes associated with loss. The play therefore presents evangelism as a warning against allowing fear to replace reflection, faith, and moral responsibility. Its resolution is tragic, but the tragedy makes the consequences of spiritual compromise visible.

Evangelical Motifs in *Cold Wings of Darkness*

Cold Wings of Darkness dramatises conflict between Christian faith, scepticism, materialism, and destructive spiritual forces. Odogu remains committed to prayer and Christian principles, while his wife, Ite, questions the practical value of his faith. Their children, Ojuma and Ngosi, respond differently to the family's religious and social tensions. The play's metaphysical conflict, represented through Ekwensu, gives dramatic form to the struggle over belief, identity, and moral choice.

Evangelism as spiritual and domestic struggle. Odogu's faith is tested within his own household. His efforts to influence his family show that evangelism can be emotionally difficult when those closest to the witness reject or ridicule the message. His concern about moral decay and his continued appeals to his wife and children position Christian witness as both a domestic responsibility and a response to wider social problems.

Scepticism and resistance. Ojuma questions the existence of God and dismisses religious belief, while Ite regards prayer as insufficient for dealing with material hardship. These responses show that evangelism confronts intellectual doubt as well as practical frustration. The play presents resistance as arising from competing worldviews and from characters' perceptions that religious principles have little power in a corrupt society.

Spiritual deception and delayed decision. Ekwensu encourages hatred, greed, conflict, and rejection of Christian influence. His hostility to prayer positions evangelism as a challenge to forces that thrive on fear and division. Ojuma's hesitation to accept Christ illustrates the motif of delayed decision: understanding the message does not necessarily lead to immediate commitment. The play suggests that postponement can deepen the consequences of unresolved moral and spiritual conflict.

Awakening and transformative acceptance. Ngosi's movement towards Christianity and her question about whether she can be saved despite her past (51), followed by her statement that she feels renewed (52), represent the possibility of transformation. Her experience contrasts with characters who resist or postpone change. At the same time, the play's criticism of respectable

churchgoers who are "good pretenders" (26) highlights hypocrisy as an obstacle to evangelism. Christian witness loses credibility when conduct contradicts confession.

Through these motifs, *Cold Wings of Darkness* presents evangelism as a struggle involving both external opposition and internal choice. Faith is portrayed as a source of hope, but the play also exposes the damage caused by hypocrisy, materialism, deception, and the refusal to confront one's own actions.

Thematic and Narrative Elements

Across the three plays, Anigala develops evangelical motifs through recurring dramatic strategies.

Character struggle and growth. Characters embody competing moral and spiritual positions. Bini's consistency contrasts with Enumah's uncertainty; Opone's doctrinal instruction challenges Uche's reliance on cult protection; and Odogu's faith confronts the scepticism and materialism within his family. Character development makes evangelism a process of encounter and decision rather than a single declaration.

Dialogue and conflict. Evangelistic ideas are developed through argument, warning, rebuke, questioning, and resistance. The exchanges between Bini and Enumah, and between Odogu and members of his family, make faith a contested subject. Dialogue allows characters to articulate their beliefs while revealing the assumptions and anxieties that shape their choices.

Symbolism and imagery. Dreams, marine spirits, charms, cult objects, prayer, and the metaphysical figure of Ekwensu give visible form to spiritual conflict. Darkness and destructive forces signify moral and spiritual danger, while repentance and renewed faith suggest the possibility of restoration. These images strengthen the thematic links between belief, action, and consequence.

Revelation and consequence. Each play uses a moment of crisis to expose the implications of earlier decisions. Enumah's dream forces him to confront guilt; Uche's loss undermines his confidence in ritual protection; and the tragic events in *Cold Wings of Darkness* reveal the destructive consequences of deception and moral compromise. These plot developments make the plays' evangelical concerns integral to their narrative structures.

Morality and ethical responsibility. The plays repeatedly connect spiritual belief with conduct. Sexual responsibility, honesty, accountability, family obligations, and resistance to corruption are not treated as separate from faith. Anigala's dramatic vision suggests that evangelical witness requires moral credibility and that spiritual transformation must be reflected in choices and relationships.

Findings

The analysis identifies five principal findings. First, Anigala repeatedly uses warning, confrontation with sin, resistance, conviction, spiritual awakening, and repentance to dramatise evangelism. Second, the selected plays represent evangelism as a contested process shaped by fear, scepticism, social pressure, and personal choice. Third, characterisation and dialogue are central to the representation of Christian witness, as characters debate and resist competing moral

and spiritual positions. Fourth, symbols such as dreams, cult objects, marine spirits, and Ekwensu externalise conflicts between faith and spiritual compromise. Finally, the plays connect spiritual change with ethical responsibility and suggest that hypocrisy can undermine the credibility of Christian witness.

Recommendations

Christian dramatists may develop evangelical themes through character transformation, ethical dilemmas, dialogue, symbolism, and plot rather than relying exclusively on direct preaching. Dramatic representations of warning, repentance, forgiveness, and spiritual awakening should retain attention to the social pressures and personal conflicts that shape characters' decisions. Churches and Christian organisations may also use drama as a form of storytelling that encourages reflection and dialogue, while recognising that the plays' literary representations do not by themselves establish measurable audience outcomes.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that evangelical motifs are central to the dramatic structure and thematic concerns of *Riddles of Life*, *The Living Dead*, and *Cold Wings of Darkness*. In *Riddles of Life*, warning, conviction, resistance, guilt, and repentance frame evangelism as a continuing invitation to moral and spiritual renewal. In *the Living Dead*, fear, syncretism, and reliance on ritual protection marginalise Christian witness until tragic consequences expose the limitations of those practices. In *Cold Wings of Darkness*, evangelism is dramatised through domestic conflict, scepticism, spiritual deception, delayed decision, hypocrisy, and the possibility of transformation. Across the selected plays, Anigala uses characterisation, dialogue, symbolism, and crisis to show that evangelism is not simply proclamation. It is tested by social pressures, competing beliefs, and the conduct of those who claim to represent Christian values. The plays present repentance and renewal as possible, while acknowledging that resistance and delayed decisions can have serious consequences. They therefore contribute to the study of Nigerian drama by demonstrating how evangelical motifs can function simultaneously as religious ideas, sources of dramatic conflict, and devices for exploring moral responsibility.

Contribution to Knowledge

This article offers a focused reading of evangelical motifs in three plays by Austin E. Anigala. It identifies recurring motifs and shows how they operate through character development, dialogue, symbolism, conflict, and resolution. By distinguishing the plays' religious themes from the dramatic techniques through which those themes are communicated, the article provides a framework for further study of evangelism in Nigerian dramatic literature.

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